DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 019 FL 017 817

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TITLE Instruction of EFL Composition in China.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Educational History; Educational Objectives; Educational Strategies; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Political Influences; Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; Textbooks; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *China

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the state of writing instruction in English as a foreign language (EFL) in China begins with a review of the history of instruction, and then looks at the current situation in Chinese schools. The focus in on political influences on the evolution of EFL composition instruction and on problems in the acceptance of contemporary teaching methods. Some attention is given to the quality and influence of the available textbooks and the training of English language teachers. It is noted that EFL composition is still considered irrelevant for all but a few disciplines, and that while there are many more western teachers of EFL in China at present, their instructional approaches correspond more to their age and training than to the appropriateness of their methods. Emphasis appears to be on form rather than the generation of ideas. It is concluded that instruction in EFL composition does not currently meet the need for writers of English in China. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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# Instruction of EFL Composition in China

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Running Head: EFL COMPOSITION IN CHINA

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# Instruction of EFL Composition in China

As China opens its doors wider to the outside world, the Chinese enjoy new opportunities, many of which require an ability to write in English. Students intending to apply for study in an English-speaking country have to take an English proficiency test which has a writing component, and they often have to write a statement of intention in the application. Scientists and social scientists publishing a paper in an international journal have to prepare an English manuscript. English majors now find opportunities beyond their traditional jobs as interpreters and school teachers: they may become journalists who have to write in English for news agencies, newspapers, or magazines; and they may become staff in joint ventures who have to conduct business in English, both spoken and written.

The widely-felt need for writing proficiency in English, however, is not readily met by the status quo of EFL instruction in China, where the teaching of composition in English is still smarting under the consequences of having been neglected for about three decades, and what little instruction of English composition is carried out only represents misplaced enthusiasm.

In this paper I'll first take a look at the history of English instruction in China and its effect on EFL composition, and then examine the current situation of EFL

composition in Chinese schools. As English education in China is closely tied up with the changes in the political and social atmosphere, it would be too ambitious to attempt to explain every step of its development, but a broad outline of what actually happened will be sufficient to portray the plight of EFL composition instruction over the years.

In the early fifties, the Russian language took the place of English as the required foreign language at both secondary and higher education levels. English survived as a discipline only in a small number of foreign languages departments at major universities in a few big cities. In the instruction of English in those departments, the grammar-translation approach, partly copied from the Soviet Union, and partly inherited from the practices at some of the state owned universities in the thirties and forties, dominated the curriculum design, text preparation, and classroom activities. It is true that the approach devoted a substantial amount of time to written work; but it was exclusively in the form of grammar and translation exercises, with a view to reinforcing grammatical structures, vocabulary and usage. Although the written form lent them a semblance of writing, those exercises had nothing to do with writing as a meaning-making process because they didn't involve developing and communicating an idea or making a point. The students learned, at best, an

ability to manipulate sentence segments, thus trapping them "within the the sentence," to use Ann Raimes' (1983) words in describing ESL/EFL instruction in general (p. 260). Therefore, the written work incorporated in the teaching of English in China in the early fifties could be more appropriately characterized, in Trisha Dvorak's (1986) terminology, as transcription rather than composition.

In the late fifties, when the whole nation was caught up in the "Big Leap Forward," foreign languages departments, albeit hesitantly, started to help students to "leap forward," by encouraging "Emulation Campaigns" in vocabulary memorization: students competed with each other in memorizing a longer list of words every day. The alleged justification was that more words memorized in a shorter time meant greater efficiency in learning the language. The obsession with the number of words imprinted on the cerebral tissue each day took its toll: memorized lexical items torn out of context were easily forgotten and didn't contribute to students' language proficiency while the unnatural effort at rote learning pre-empted concerns with discourse.

Another characteristic of English instruction in the late fifties was that ideology took absolute precedence over every other consideration. Texts that included writings by English-speaking authors were denounced as capitalistic and were replaced with English translations of Chinese political documents. In written work students were expected to repeat

the slogans and phrases from those documents, mostly in individual sentences. Obviously that period wasn't a time when English composition instruction could thrive since translations didn't provide students with any sense of authentic vernacular English, and repetition of slogans didn't lead to discourse competence.

The early sixties witnessed a change in the Chinese authorities' attitude toward foreign language instruction. Marshal Chen Yi, the then Foreign Minister, supported by the former Premier Zhou Enlai, delivered two speeches to the students of Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, emphasizing the importance of not only being ideologically sound but also professionally competent. The message was clear. A campaign to improve the standards of foreign language instruction was instantly under way.

In charge of the campaign was Zhou Yang, the then Minister of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and also a former major of English who had translated Leo Tolstoy's works from English into Chinese. He felt the need to "borrow" from the West a more recent methodology to replace the method widely in use at the time, i.e. the grammar-translation approach, which didn't seem to be effective in producing competent interpreters and foreign language teachers. He seemed to find audio-lingualism appealing for he started energetically to advocate "giving priority to listening and speaking" and

"imitating the Lingaphone records 300 times."

Owing to his status as a renowned translator and influential official, and also to the need the language teachers felt for a change, the "listening and speaking first" approach was quickly instituted in many foreign languages departments. Students devoted most, if not all, of their energy and time to imitation of dialogues, drills in oral expression, and memorization of models, presuming that, once they could reproduce from memory all those expressions and sentences in the pronunciation and intonation they were imitating, they would become proficient in the language they attempted to learn. One of the consequences was that writing was banished further from the center of instruction, only occasionally used as a tool for consolidating oral language development, "a decidedly subordinate role," to use a phrase from R. J. Vann (1981, p. 155).

However, the audio-lingual methods didn't hold sway in Chinese colleges and universities for long; however, the diminishing of its influence didn't make the atmosphere any friendlier to the instruction of EFL composition. There were three reasons behind the inability of the audio-lingual approach to remain in full swing. First of all, although there were a lot of hullabaloos about listening and speaking in China, nobody systematically introduced audio-lingualism in its entirety complete with its theoretical foundation and

classroom activities. All a classroom teacher could work with was a few catchphrases such as "listening and speaking before anything else." She could only make do with a patchwork of whatever she could find in her professional repertoire, usually full of inconsistencies. As a result, the instruction could hardly be very fruitful.

Secondly, the faculty responsible for teaching English to students who weren't English majors had been resistant to the audio-lingual method from the start, believing that as their objective was to teach their students how to read and translate English materials in their disciplines, listening and speaking were irrelevant. This negative attitude must have had some inhibiting effect on the adoption of the audio-lingual approach.

Thirdly, the senior faculty in English and other foreign languages, who had mostly been trained in Western literature or philology, had accepted the "listening and speaking first" campaign with suspicion and reluctance in the first place. They had greater confidence in the methods that had made them what they were, either the grammar-translation method or the direct method. They felt more comfortable keeping or returning to what they thought to be the time-honored methods.

As a matter of fact, the grammar-translation tradition persisted tenaciously all the time, surviving the upsurge of audio-lingualism, and remaining strong after audio-

lingualism started to subside. (By the way, even twenty years later, in the early eighties, grammar-translation was still found to be the predominant method in China [Fisher-Kohn, 1986; Scovel, 1983].) The most tangible evidence was the eight volumes of the standardized textbook English compiled, in the early sixties, by Xu Guozhang (Vols. 1-4), Yu Dayin (Vols. 5-6), and Xu Yanmou and Yang Xiaoshi (Vols. 7-8). There is no denying that as the only officially assigned text for English majors, from freshman to senior, those books were very widely used. In fact, a whole generation of Chinese students of English have benefited from them one way or another.

Nevertheless, unmistakably based on the grammar-translation approach, those books didn't contain a component for the instruction of composition. The basic format of each lesson included a short piece of prose as the primary text, a list of difficult words, notes on the grammatical structures and idioms, a list of useful patterns with additional examples, questions on the content of the text, grammar and usage exercises, sentence and passage translation exercises. While written answers to the questions on the text could come close to paragraph writing, all the other exercises only served the purpose of reinforcing transcription. Starting with the sixth volume, a few notes were added to each lesson to prescribe a selection of rules about style (e.g., clarity and concision)

and to explain figures of speech. Those notes purported to teach rhetoric, but as they focused exclusively on a small part of style, ignoring invention and arrangement, they could do very little in helping students develop the ability to write.

Moreover, simply because those volumes were the only textbooks to be used, their influence was ubiquitous and profound. The overall pattern of priorities they set was tacitly in force in all the instruction of English in China. Composition was still ostracized almost everywhere. As exceptions to the rule, a select few of the English Departments in Beijing and Shanghai offered composition courses, but that didn't change the overall picture at all.

Then the political turmoil that erupted in 1966 under the name of the "Great Cultural Revolution" put a stop to the instruction of foreign languages altogether. Not until the early seventies did English teaching resume in colleges and on TV. Even then, as people with only a few years' schooling were admitted into universities, the academic standards had to be drastically lowered. With the students busy grappling with basics, composition was out of the question.

This situation continued until shortly after the "Great Cultural Revolution" was terminated in 1976. Then extensive changes took place in China's educational system, the first goal being restoring the normalcy of teaching. In the

English department, the nostalgia for the early sixties surfaced, donning the legitimate cloak of seeking a normality in instruction. An emulation of the early sixties was popular among administrators and faculty, but the momentum for change didn't wear itself out at the restoration of the "good ole days." What had appeared perfect in retrospect left a great deal to be desired when replicated in reality.

An instance of imperfection, the conspicuous absence of composition instruction from almost all of the curricula for English majors didn't go unnoticed by the faculty who were involved in those curricula. They filled up this void by creating composition courses. The general emergence of EFL composition courses marked the end of a prolonged period when EFL composition was neglected. During that period, many years of political turmoil didn't make for a congenial environment for foreign language learning, and furthermore, the dominant methodology (the grammar-translation approach and the audio-lingual approach) deprived composition of the attention it deserved. To use an illuminating detail to illustrate the period, for more than a quarter of a century, for a nation that accounts for a quarter of the world's population, for a land that is the third largest in the world, never was a single copy of English composition textbook published.

The period of total neglect is fortunately over, but

its consequences still remain. Composition is still considered as secondary to other courses, even after it has become a fixture in the curricula for English majors. The general view is that "intensive reading" (a course that uses reading texts to teach vocabulary, usage and sentence patterns), "listening comprehension," and "conversation" are essential, and literature and linguistics are prestigious, whereas composition is only an extension that is good to have but not indispensable.

Composition is still considered irrelevant to students of disciplines other than English, International Journalism, and International Trade. A survey I did in September 1987 of 14 Chinese graduate students in natural sciences and social sciences at Indiana University of Pennsylvania revealed that none of them had had any instruction in EFL composition during their undergraduate study in China. To the question "Did you ever write paragraphs or essays in English when you were in your native country?", the answer was a unanimous NO. In an interview, an exchange faculty from China who is in charge of the English-across-disciplines program at Nanjing University confirmed that composition is not a part of the instruction of English to undergraduate non-majors, and that the students are rarely required to write in English beyond the sentence level.

In the instruction of EFL composition to English majors, except for the few composition specialists hired

from the English-speaking countries, most instructors misplace their enthusiasm on demanding accuracy at the expense of fluency and on teaching about form--rules about the traditional "four modes of discourse and the "methods of development," such as illustration, classification, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect.

From 1978 on, China started to employ professors of English in considerable numbers from the West through TESOL, Fulbright, the British Council, inter-collegiate exchanges as well as direct personal contacts--among them composition specialists like Richard Coe (Coe, 1988), Ann Johns (Johns, 1984), and Carolyn Matalyne (Matalyne, 1985). Those specialists exposed their Chinese students to more recent composition theories, methodology, and textbooks (e.g., sentence-combining, as exemplified by Daiker, Kerek, & Morenberg's The Writer's Options: Combining to Composing). The impact of those composition specialists' seminal work will be felt in time, but so far, due to the limited number and duration of the programs and classes they conduct, what they do remains proportionally insignificant on the vast scene of EFL education in China.

As for the Chinese instructors who teach EFL composition courses, their academic proclivities are related with their age. They can be roughly divided into three age groups: the older group (those over fifty-five), the middle-age group (those between thirty-five and fifty-five), and

the younger group (those under thirty-five). The older group were mostly trained in literature and what Fogarty (1959) called the "current-traditional" rhetoric when they studied under American or British professors before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. (Richar Young [1978] summarized the overt features of "current-traditional" rhetoric as "the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage ... and with style ...." [p. 31]) They represent a combined tradition of the familiar essay, the "current-traditional" rhetoric, and contempt for composition as an academic discipline.

The middle-age group, which constitutes the majority of the composition teachers, studied English when composition was hardly taught anywhere, as shown in the above brief recount of the recent history of EFL instruction in China. Most of them learned to write on their own through reading and writing, but they aren't confident of their own experience. They feel they need some rhetorical theory to back up their teaching. They have found the "current-traditional" rhetoric in the composition texts published in the English-speaking countries which have recently been introduced into China in large numbers, and they are

experiencing the thrill of "discovering" the four modes of discourse, the methods of development, and the topic sentence. The younger group, although some of them have learned some new ideas about composition in the courses taught by "foreign experts" in recent years, don't have any visible influence on the teaching of composition in general, as they only account for a negligible percentage of the composition teachers as yet.

Thus, it's small wonder that the instruction of EFL composition, conducted by instructors with backgrounds as analyzed above, is in the "current-traditional" rhetorical tradition, with excessive emphasis on teaching about form rather than the writing process. The instructors like to lecture on the four modes of discourse, the methods of development, the topic sentence, etc., excluding invention from their syllabus. The whole business of composition seems to be putting ready-made ideas in pre-established form. Finding things to say--generating ideas--isn't considered as a part of composition.

The instructors like to explain rules <u>about</u> the form, rules that are concerned more with "know about" than with "know how." They will feel they are remiss in performing their duty if they don't prescribe many "Do's" and "Don'ts." And that feeling is strengthened by the fact that most students will not be satisfied until they have taken down large doses of prescriptive information which they can

record, memorize, and repeat. The instructors like keeping control over every step of form teaching, allegedly moving from the word, to the sentence, to the paragraph. They tend, however, to stall on the sentence when they are dismayed by the number of errors they find in student writing. They hope to implant the perfect sentence in the student's mind by drills and exercises. The instructors don't like giving free rein to students for fear that their compositions might be too messy to correct, beating the purpose of what they perceive as gradual progression. Therefore they hesitate to go beyond controlled composition, which is often reduced to mechanical exercises.

The instructors' zeal for form is best illustrated by what they do with student papers. They make a point of marking and correcting each and every grammar and usage error, no matter how little attention the students will pay to their corrections. And their meticulous effort meets with approval from the administrators. For example, in a recent issue of China's leading newspaper People's Daily (Overseas Edition), a feature article highly commended a senior professor of English for correcting every error in his students' writing. Considering the acknowledged propaganda function of the newspapers in China, that professor's relentless attention to every error was cited as a model for every instructor to emulate.

After correcting the papers, the instructor spends

whole class hours commenting on the errors and inappropriate usage, supplementing his explanations with syntactical diagramming, parsing, and drills. Composition classes turn into grammar lectures; compositions become materials for grammar and usage analyses. Finally, the instructor bases his evaluation primarily on what he corrects and comments on, i.e., grammar and usage, traits most conveniently quantifiable.

Sensitive to the way their work is evaluated, the students are very quick to adjust their priorities, staying with the structures and vocabulary they are sure of, the ultimate goal being avoidance of errors. As a result, accuracy pre-empts fluency; form overwhelms meaning, resulting in a misleading sense of the writing process: meaning doesn't shape itself, but has to be squeezed into procrustean molds.

Given the cumulative effect of neglect for over thirty years, and the current practice that misplaces emphasis on teaching about form and on reducing the frequency and gravity of linguistic imperfections, it is not surprising that EFL composition instruction in China isn't satisfactorily meeting the nationwide need for better writers of English. The first step toward changing the situation has to be an awareness of the inadequacy of the present situation, but that awareness is yet to be evoked.

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